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## BORDER DISPUTES

### Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans by Alan Riding

(Knopf, 385 pp., \$18.95)

Some of the Central Intelligence Agency's station chiefs in Latin America used to joke during President Reagan's first term about "looking for the ayatollah." There was a gung-ho attitude in the agency, led by its director and abetted by then-national intelligence officer Constantine Menges. There was pressure to report that Mexico was on its way to becoming "an Iran-next-door," and even though there was nothing substantial to support this contention, agents and analysts had the choice of proving a negative or—worst of stigmas—appearing naive.

The weight of unreality grew so heavy that last year Menges's successor, veteran intelligence officer John Horton, resigned in protest rather than adapt the National Intelligence Estimate on Mexico to what he considered alarmist standards. The estimate was supposed to be the last, best word on what was going on south of the border; and Horton, it seems, did not think the ayatollah had a role in it.

Fortunately, the public does not have to rely on the CIA for its information. It now has at hand an estimate as intelligent as anyone is likely to find on the condition of Mexico today. Alan

Riding's best-selling book is an elegant, comprehensive essay on that nation very much as it is, not as one might want it—or fear it.

Mexico, so close and yet so foreign, has always provided fertile ground for the ambitions and the anxieties of American politicians, whether the Alamo is under attack, the Zimmerman telegram is on the wire, or illegal aliens are massed for a silent invasion across the border. It is easy to conjure the spectral menace of a crazed and hostile world that begins just south of Brownsville. Most people in the United States (and many Mexicans) are befuddled by the labyrinths of Mexican society and government. And the problems created by

Mexico's mix of oil riches, corruption, poverty, population, and frequently repressive politics, and by the proximity of regional turmoil, are real enough. (Consider the recent case of U.S. drug enforcement agent Enrique Camarena, murdered, it seems, by Mexican police officials; they were themselves deeply involved in narcotics trafficking, and their confessions were apparently beaten out of them by their erstwhile colleagues. What better image of ruthlessness, lawlessness, and corruption?)

Still, as Riding makes abundantly clear, the danger of confused alarms about the future of Mexico is that finally they lead nowhere, except toward ignorant meddling by the United States that can turn real problems into real disasters. Riding has an especially sophisticated understanding of this dangerous dynamic. He spent 13 years in Mexico, most of the time as the correspondent for *The New York Times*. Apart from his perfect Spanish, he had a remarkable level of cultural fluency. He was comfortable with many of the most influential figures in the Mexican government, and generally they appear to have been comfortable with him. Riding's access and understanding allow him to examine Mexico's weaknesses in detail, and also to make the system's contradictions comprehensible and to appreciate its strengths.

THE essential accomplishment of modern Mexico has been to maintain stability, wringing a functional peace from the bloody tumult of its past. Neither a democracy in conventional terms nor a dictatorship, Mexico's political system under the all-powerful PRI, or Institutionalized Revolutionary Party, bears less resemblance to the ayatollah's Iran than to Mario Puzo's Mafia. It is not the product of fanaticism, but of cold-blooded pragmatism. Its ideology is survival, and it has been flexible enough to bend with shift-

ing domestic and international political currents. Traditionally it is ruthless, but traditionally it also delivers what its people want.

"Almost instinctively," Riding reports, the PRI "co-opts emergent opposition leaders, either giving them influential jobs in government or neutralizing them with money . . . Opposition groups that stray outside this context are more vulnerable to direct repression." Riding mentions massacres of leftist students in 1968 and 1971, and the subsequent disappearances of other dissidents. "But the government also considers resort to such tactics a poor reflection on its bargaining talents: it should be the fear—and not the fact—of unrest and repression that makes negotiations possible." What the PRI normally does with its opponents, in other words, is make them offers they can't refuse.

Mexico's notorious corruption becomes "a practical way of bridging the gap between idealistic legislation and

the management of day-to-day living," and the concept of corruption "often becomes indistinguishable from that of influence, which flourishes among the family and friends of leading politicians and blends naturally into the old tradition of favor and patronage. . . . Today, corruption enables the system to function, providing the 'oil' that makes the wheels of the bureaucratic machine turn and the 'glue' that seals political alliances." From such contradictions comes a synthesis that seems to work, decade after decade, however strange or unseemly it may be in North American eyes. And if Mexico's regime did not presume to look outside its borders, one presumes the Reagan administration would be content with it. It is authoritarian; it is stable; it is basically, if not slavishly, pro-American on most issues.

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And yet administration officials look for the ayatollah.

It is reasonable to be wary of developing dangers, certainly. Riding carefully points out that while "nothing has proven more wrong than predicting the demise of Mexico's political system," there "is little room for complacency. Beneath the surface calm, the repercussions of change, growth, urbanization are subjecting society to unprecedented strain." But the peculiar alarmism evident in Washington seems to go beyond that. Sometimes it appears less protective than vindictive. Mexico has crossed the United States recently, and the attitude of many members of the administration is, plainly, that it has no right.

WASHINGTON is intent on bringing the Caribbean basin firmly back under its control, now going so far as to push openly for the overthrow of Nicaragua's government; and Mexico, with legalisms and peace initiatives, keeps getting in the way. The administration sees the contagion of communist revolution sweeping up from the south toward the biggest domino of all—Mexico itself—but the Mexicans are somehow blind to it. They may not embrace the Sandinistas as they once did, but they seem congenitally ill-disposed toward efforts to oust them.

In this context Mexico's diplomatic initiatives become, as a leaked White House document put it, something to be "trumped." And looking for the ayatollah, even in a figurative sense, is a way of insinuating that Mexico is incapable of keeping its own house in order, much less making suggestions about anyone else's.

MEANWHILE Washington has come to define "democracy" as the way our friends govern themselves. And from such a standpoint, if Mexico looks less than friendly on certain issues, it is deemed less than democratic. Even as the administration helps Mexico with its disastrous finances, behind-the-scenes administration officials encourage criticism of Mexico's political abuses and fuel the enthusiasm for its right-wing, business-oriented opposition parties. The opposition, in turn, criticizes the PRI for not supporting U.S. policy in Central America.

On this difficult juncture between foreign and domestic policy, Riding's analysis is clear and dispassionate. He outlines the complicated relations between successive Mexican presidents and Fidel Castro, the history of Mexican aid to Nicaragua's Sandinistas, and Mexican cooperation with El Salvador's insurgents. He presents the divisions within President Miguel de la Madrid's own cabinet over these issues. And then he presents the problems as de la Madrid would have to see them. "A more conservative foreign policy alone would not appease domestic conservatives, but it would alienate liberals and leftists who give relatively more importance to foreign affairs." De la Madrid might distance himself from Cuba and Nicaragua and El Salvador's revolutionaries

without gaining credibility and influence in Washington. Mexico clearly cannot afford to withdraw from Central America, to allow the fate of a strategic region to be defined entirely by others. It also cannot endorse a U.S. strategy that appears to feed instability. Its only remaining option, therefore, was to remain politically aligned with revolutionary forces in the region. As in the past, the new government looked for alternatives, but found that Washington—and history—permitted none.

Riding concludes with a warning that, thus far, has been little heeded by the administration. He has tried throughout the book to draw a contrast between the upwardly mobile, highly Americanized middle classes, the part of the Mexican population to which Washington pays the most attention, and "the ordinary Mexicans," most of them peasants or the children of peasants, whose roots have more spiritual depth—in the mysticism of the Catholic church and the Aztec Temple—and whose patience, unless sorely tested, has much greater endurance than most Western cultures have seen. "By trying to make the country more superficially democratic, more Western, more 'presentable' abroad," Riding cautions, "the system's roots in the population have weakened. It has become less truly democratic because it is less representative of real Mexicans. The more

the system responds to the Americanized minority, the more blatant will be the contradictions within the country." The greater the chance, one might say, that there will be an ayatollah to look for.

#### CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

Christopher Dickey's book on the United States and Nicaragua will be published in the fall by Simon and Schuster.